

LETTERS

THE BENEFITS OF TAI CHI

We are indebted to Li et al.¹ for their demonstration that an intervention exercise regime based on tai chi is not only effective for preventing falls among elderly persons but also can be well tolerated and thoroughly enjoyed. The participants in their study also likely benefited in other ways: physiologically, psychologically, and socially. It appears that even a brief exposure to a simplified version of tai chi can be effective for highly motivated elderly participants with a fear of falling.

What motivates members of the general public to learn tai chi? Speaking as a student of traditional tai chi (guang ping yang style) for over a quarter century (with some of those years as a teacher) and the husband of my instructor, an internationally recognized *shur fu*, I can attest that motivation is a frequent topic among tai chi teachers. To address this, I conducted a simple survey among 103 students at 8 schools of tai chi in Rhode Island, Massachusetts, New York, and Wisconsin. These schools were open to the public, charged tuition, and largely taught the same style. We asked the students—mostly women (86%), with a mean age of 54 (SD=15) years—why they wanted to learn tai chi. Our questionnaire offered 11 possible motivations. The students



Illinois National Guard member Gabriel Garriga is shown here at Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio, Texas, where he is recovering after being severely wounded in Iraq. Photograph by Ed Kashi. Printed with permission.

gave a wide range of responses, with many indicating multiple motivations. Nearly all (90%) of the students reported wanting to “improve overall fitness.” Most also wanted to relieve stress (73%), wanted to improve coordination and balance to help avoid falls (70%), had an interest in things Chinese (62%), wanted to use tai chi as an aid to meditation (56%), or wished to learn an exercise that did not require equipment (55%). Fewer were motivated by an interest in self-defense (41%), martial arts (30%), or dance and choreography (20%). Only a small subgroup reported attending at the suggestion of their doctor (6%) or to accompany a friend or relative (5%).

These responses are of interest not only to help outreach but also to help schools and instructors adjust the content or emphasis of the classes. No matter what reasons people have for beginning the study of tai chi, those who learn the discipline before reaching advanced age have more years to enjoy and benefit from this health-promoting exercise than do those who learn it late in life. ■

Michael Rabinowitz, PhD

About the Author

The author is with the Marine Biological Laboratory, Woods Hole, MA, and Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.

Requests for reprints should be sent to Michael Rabinowitz, PO Box 535, Newport, RI 02840 (e-mail: mrabinow@mbi.edu).

This letter was accepted July 15, 2008.
doi:10.2105/AJPH.2008.146837

Reference

1. Li F, Harmer P, Glasgow R, et al. Translation of an effective tai chi intervention into a community-based falls-prevention program. *Am J Public Health*. 2008;98:1195–1197.

LI AND HARMER RESPOND

We appreciate Rabinowitz's comments on our work¹ and the important issue he raises related to understanding individual physical, psychological, and social needs underlying tai chi participation.

Growing research-based evidence has made it clear that tai chi provides a wide array of health benefits,^{2,3} from the physical (e.g., improved postural stability, functional

Letters to the editor referring to a recent Journal article are encouraged up to 3 months after the article's appearance. By submitting a letter to the editor, the author gives permission for its publication in the Journal. Letters should not duplicate material being published or submitted elsewhere. The editors reserve the right to edit and abridge letters and to publish responses.

Text is limited to 400 words and 10 references. Submit online at www.ajph.org for immediate Web posting, or at submit.ajph.org for later print publication. Online responses are automatically considered for print publication. Queries should be addressed to the Editor-in-Chief, Mary E. Northridge, PhD, MPH, at men11@columbia.edu.